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Religious Pluralism and the Transcendent Unity of Religions

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Abstract

Contrasting the modern notions of 'religious pluralism' with the principle of the transcendent unity of religions aims at learning to understand religions both in their diversity as well as their inner unity. The following discussion first depicts the possible meanings of religious pluralism, and then goes on to explain the teachings of the transcendent unity of religions. It concludes with the implications of this confrontation.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, transcendent unity of religions, world religions, religious unity, modernity, secularism, traditionalism, sophia perennis, religious esotericism, mysticism.

Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism, as an existing phenomenon, has been interpreted in different ways. The position of modern sociology, which has developed this concept, is to comprehend religious pluralism as a characteristic of modernity. In this context modernity is understood as an outcome of secularisation. Sociology, especially that of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, generally defines pluralism as a situation in which there is competition in the institutional ordering of comprehensive meanings for everyday life.

Historically, such competition generally succeeds a situation in which it was more or less absent. That is, pluralism is the consequence of a historical process of de-monopolisation. The global historical force producing pluralism is secularization, by which we mean the progressive autonomization of social sectors from the domination of religious meanings and institutions.

In analyzing the social-structural dimension of pluralism it is possible to distinguish between the latter's effect on the relationship between institutional religion and other social institutions, and the effect on institutional religion itself. The social structure has its correlates in subjective consciousness. Religious pluralism, to wit, entails religious subjectivization. This means that the old religious contents lose their status of objective facticity in individual consciousness.

This change is already given in the reflective attitude that the consumer comes to take as he is presented with a multiplicity of products. He must choose between them and is thereby forced to hesitate, to compare, and to deliberately evaluate. In this process the traditional religious affirmations about the nature of reality lose their taken-for-granted quality. They cease to be objective truth and become matters of subjective choice, belief, and preference. Other meaning-systems come to take the place of the objective facticity that was previously occupied by religious tradition.[1]

This purely sociological portrayal of religious pluralism is not aware of religion's truth. Ultimately, it only expresses the existing crisis-of-meaning imbued in modernity itself. Hence, without doubt, religion can best and most adequately be understood from the point of view of religion itself. Accordingly, this is also true for the plurality and diversity of religions. Concerning the idea of religious pluralism, as seen by the various religions, there exist great differences.

Judaism, as the first of the monotheistic religions, does not acknowledge any other religion as a matter of principle, whether that religion had been existing before it or emerged afterwards. Christianity as the second monotheistic religion, sees Judaism to a certain degree as a prefiguration of Christian revelation. But it does not acknowledge Islam that arose later. Eventually, Islam acknowledged both Judaism and Christianity as true revelations, though they only reached completion in and through the religion of Islam. In praxis this resulted in Christianity holding a monopoly in Christian countries for centuries. In most Islamic countries the religion of Islam was and is—apart from some small minorities—the sole religion. This meant that Christianity lost its monopoly.

"With the collapse of the Europe-centered view of the world and the rapid development of international interaction in various fields of human life, have Christians come again to experience intensely the reality of religious pluralism. In this connection they have come to recognize the existence of non-Christian religions and the integrity of non-Christian systems of belief and values, not only in foreign lands, but in Europe and America as well. Hence, religious pluralism now appears to many Christians to be a serious challenge to the monotheistic character of Christianity. On the other hand, Buddhism, throughout its long history, has existed and spread throughout Asia within a religiously pluralistic situation: in India, it coexisted with Brahmanism, Jainism and many diverse forms of Hinduism; in China with Confucianism and Taoism; and in Japan with Shinto and Confucianism. Thus to most Buddhists the experience of 'religious pluralism' has not been the serious shock it has been to most Christians".[2]

And certainly not the shock it would be for the representatives of both other monotheistic religions. The Christian shock was peculiar and corresponds not so much to the two other monotheistic religions as it

does to the non-monotheistic religions. Meanwhile Christian theologians tried to deal with this shock by way of a theology of religious pluralism. The central question asked by such a theology was whether religious pluralism should be accepted as a reality, de facto, in our present world or if it should, on the contrary, be viewed theologically as existing de jure.

"In the first case, the plurality of religions… is seen as a factor to be reckoned with, rather than welcomed… In the other case, the same plurality is welcomed as a positive factor which witnesses at once to the superabundant generosity with which God has manifested himself to humankind in manifold ways and to the pluriform response which human beings of diverse cultures have given to the Divine self-disclosure. Seen from God's side, the question is whether religious pluralism is only permitted by God or, on the contrary, positively willed by Him. Or rather—if one prefers to avoid both these terms—the question is whether theology is able to assign to the plurality of religious traditions a positive meaning in God's overall design for humankind or not".[3]

The Catholic theologian Schillebeeckx responds to this problematic question by noticing that even in the Christian self-understanding…

"The multiplicity of religions is not an evil which needs to be removed, but rather a wealth which is to be welcomed and enjoyed by all.… The unity, identity and uniqueness of Christianity over and against the other religions… lies in the fact that Christianity is a religion which associates the relationship to God within the context of a historical and thus a very specific and therefore limited particularity: Jesus of Nazareth. This is the uniqueness and identity of Christianity, but at the same time, its unavoidable historical limitation. It becomes clear here that… the God of Jesus is a symbol of openness, not of confinement. Here Christianity has a positive relationship to other religions, and at the same time the loyal Christian affirmation of the positive nature of other world religions is honoured."[4]

The question here is where do the origins of religious pluralism lie? An answer can be that the principle of plurality is mainly based on the superabundant richness and diversity of God's self-manifestation to mankind. The religion of Islam acknowledges the principle of the plurality of religions to an even greater extent than does Christianity, simply because it accepts all the previous monotheistic revelations and completes them. In this sense it does not need to be explained much, whereas what calls for further discussion is Islam's problematic relationship with Hinduism and Buddhism. The solution to such a problem and similar problems can be found to lie in taking up an esoteric or transcendental point of view. The point of departure for the teachings of the transcendent unity of religions, as they have been formulated by their most important representative Frithjof Schuon, can, as paradoxical as it may seem, be found in the actual diversity of mankind and the corresponding limitations that such diversity and multiplicity call for.

The Transcendent Unity of Religions

The multiplicity of religions has its origin in the single divine Truth that has manifested itself in manifold ways to mankind throughout its history. These divine revelations occurred at different times, in different places, and to different human collectivities. Thereby they assumed different shapes.

Thus, "*what determines the differences among forms of Truth is the difference among human receptacles. For thousands of years already humanity has been divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves; the existence of spiritual receptacles so different and so original demands differentiated refractions of the one Truth*."[5]

This principle bears great meaning for there is no doubt that the Truth is one. In this context the revelations of the one divine Truth can be viewed as formalisations of this truth. And the formalisations are not completely identical with this Truth-in-itself, because, "*Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas Revelation, or the Tradition that derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and thus of plurality*."[6]

As a matter of course the principle of a multitude of revelations is "not accessible to all mentalities and its implications must remain anathema to the majority of believers. This is in the nature of things. Nevertheless, from a traditionalist viewpoint, anyone today wishing to understand religion as such and the inter-relationships of the various traditions must have a firm purchase on this principle."[7]

In this regard it has to be emphasised that every single revelation is the origin of a religion. And every religion is self-sufficient and comprises all that is necessary for man's salvation. But at the same time every religion is limited as a form. Frithjof Schuon has explained this coherence as follows:

"*A religion is a form, and so also a limit, which, 'contains' the Limitless, to speak in paradox; every form is fragmentary because of its necessary exclusion of other formal possibilities; the fact that these forms—when they are complete, that is to say when they are perfectly 'themselves'—each in their own way represent totality, does not prevent them from being fragmentary in respect of their particularisation and their reciprocal exclusion*".[8]

Given the diversity of revelations the question arises who the messengers were who received the respective revelation and passed it on. A first conclusion is that: "*The great Messengers, if they are assuredly one by their principle, in their gnosis and in the Logos, are not however of necessity equal on the phenomenal plane, that of manifestation on earth; what are equivalent are the Messages when each is taken in its entirety. It is necessary, in any case, not to confuse the phenomenal or cosmic with the spiritual reality; it is the latter which is one, and the former which is diverse.*"[9]

To understand the correlation between the diversity of revelations and the respective messengers, it has

to be clarified that the revelation received by the respective messenger is the foundation of a religion. The peculiar imprint that characterises every single religion indeed depends on when and where the respective messenger fulfilled his challenge and in what particular manner. According to this Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a follower of Frithjof Schuon, could write: "*When one says the Prophet it means the prophet of Islam…when one says the Incarnation it refers to Christ who personifies this aspect. And although every prophet and saint has experienced 'enlightenment', the Enlightenment refers to the experience of the Buddha which is the most outstanding and universal embodiment of this experience*." [10]

But how can a religion be understood and interpreted in this meaning? Essentially there are two elements which build the foundation of a religion: Namely doctrine and method, that is to say, "*a doctrine which distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative, between the absolutely Real and the relatively real…and a method of concentrating upon the Real, of attaching oneself to the Absolute and living according to the will of Heaven, in accordance with the purpose and meaning of human existence*". [11]

When we speak of a doctrine, which distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative, the question about its orthodoxy arises. "*In order to be orthodox a religion must possess a mythological or doctrinal symbolism establishing the essential distinction between the Real and the illusory, or the Absolute and the relative…and must offer a way that serves both the perfection of concentration on the Real and also its continuity. In other words a religion is orthodox on condition that it offers a sufficient, if not always exhaustive, idea of the absolute and the relative, and therewith an idea of their reciprocal relationships*." [12]

Concerning a religion's inner or outer orthodoxy Frithjof Schuon speaks clearly and precisely: "*For a religion to be considered intrinsically orthodox—an extrinsic orthodoxy hangs upon formal elements which cannot apply literally outside their own perspective—it must rest upon a fully adequate doctrine … then it must extol and actualise a spirituality that is equal to this doctrine and thereby include sanctity within its ambit both as concept and reality; this means it must be of Divine and not philosophical origin and thus be charged with a sacramental or theurgic presence*" [13]

Indeed, traditional orthodoxy means, as Schuon says: *"…being in accord with a doctrinal or ritual form, and also, and indeed above all, with the truth which resides in all revealed forms; thus the essence of every orthodoxy is intrinsic truth … and not merely the internal logic of a doctrine that may turn out to be false. What makes the definition of orthodoxy rather troublesome is that it presents two principal modes, the one essential or intrinsic, and the other formal or extrinsic: the latter is being in accord with a revealed form, and the former the being in accord with the essential and universal truth, with or without being in accord with any particular form, so that the two modes sometimes stand opposed externally. To give an example, it can be said that Buddhism is extrinsically heterodox in relation to Hinduism, because it makes a departure from the basic forms of the latter, and at the same time intrinsically orthodox, because it is in accord with that universal truth from which both traditions proceed."* [14]

In order to provide a deeper insight into the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic orthodoxy the relationship between exotericism and esotericism will be briefly explained. First, an explanation of exotericism: *"Exotericism never goes beyond the 'letter'. It puts its accent on the Law, not on any realisation, and so puts it on action and merit. It is essentially a 'belief' in a 'letter', or a dogma envisaged in its formal exclusiveness, and an obedience to ritual and moral Law. And, further, exotericism never goes beyond the individual; it is centred on heaven rather than on God, and this amounts to saying that this difference has for it no meaning."* 15

The famous American scholar Huston Smith has clarified this definition of exotericism with the following words: *"For the exoteric, God's personal mode is His only mode; for the esoteric this mode resides in one that is higher and ultimately modeless…For the exoteric the world is real in every sense; for the exoteric it has only a qualified reality…For the exoteric God is primarily loved; for the esoteric He is primarily known; though in the end the exoteric comes to know what he loves and the esoteric to love what he knows."*16

What characterises esotericism *"to the very extent that it is absolute, is that on contact with a dogmatic system, it universalises the symbol or religious concept on the one hand, and interiorizes it on the other; the particular or the limited is recognised as the manifestation of the principle and the transcendent, and this in its turn reveals itself as immanent."* 17 *And further: "If the purest esotericism includes the whole truth—and that is the very reason for its existence—the question of 'orthodoxy' in the religious sense clearly cannot arise: direct knowledge of the mysteries could not be 'Moslem' or 'Christian' just as the sight of a mountain is the sight of a mountain and not something else."* 18

The exoteric point of view is *"doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esotericism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical and initiatory realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism, inevitably engenders unbelief; the atrophy that overtakes dogmas when they are deprived of their internal dimensions recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations."* 19

Hence it is necessary to refer to religion's spirituality or religion's esoteric dimension. A religion is indeed *"not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes; this exclusion cannot impair the religions's deepest contents—every religion is intrinsically a totality—but it takes its revenge all the more surely on the intermediary plane… the arena of theological speculations and fervours…* [*hence*] *extrinsic contradictions can hide an intrinsic compatibility or identity, which amounts to saying that each of the contradictory theses contains a truth and thereby an aspect of the whole truth and a way of access to this totality."*20

In contrast, the exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is *"an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the*

exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses."[21]

The diversity of religions does not demonstrate the incorrectness of the various doctrines of the supernatural. It rather shows that revelation lies beyond the formal, whereas human comprehension has a formal nature. According to this the essence of every religion—or enlightenment—is always the same. The diversity on the contrary arises from human nature.

Conclusion

This concise and fragmentary comparison of religious pluralism and the transcendent unity of religions aimed at two things: First, to deepen the understanding of every single religion. And second, through the realisation of the esoteric and spiritual dimension of this religion, to recognize the transcendent unity of all true religions. To understand every single religion however not only requires in-depth studies, but above all demands the acceptance of the authentic self-conception of the religion.

The realisation of the metaphysical doctrine goes even further. It means to follow a spiritual path that ultimately leads to immediate love and gnosis of the divine Truth itself.

An outstanding example for such a spiritual path is the life and work of Ibn 'Arabi, who wrote in his famous *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, out of his own mystic and theosophic experience, the following marvellous verses:

My heart has become capable of every form,

a pasture for gazelles,

a convent for Christian monks,

a temple for idols,

the pilgrim's Ka'ba,

the tables of the Torah,

the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of love

whatever way Love's camels take.[22]

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